Chriſtian Charity, the only proper Principle of Man's Duty:

A

SERMON,

Occaſioned by the

Death of Mrs. FENTON,

PREACHED AT

The CHAPEL of HUNSLET,

In the PARISH of LEEDS,

On SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 1773.

By J. MILNER, M.A.
Fellow of Sidney-College, Cambridge.

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TO

WILLIAM FENTON, ESQ.

OF GLASS-HOUSE,

AND

THOMAS FENTON, ESQ.

OF ROTHWELL-HAIGH,

NEAR LEEDS,

THIS DISCOURSE

IS INSCRIBED,

BY

THEIR OBLIGED

HUMBLE SERVANT,

JAMES MILNER.

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HEBREWS xiii. 1.

Let Brotherly Love continue.

BY Religion we generally underſtand, a ſyſtem of rules and precepts, pointing out the line of human conduct towards God, and towards man. To one or other of theſe objects may be referred all the various and complicated duties of natural religion, and all thoſe injunctions revealed to us as the will of heaven.

The firſt and chief object of our regard is the Creator and Governor of the univerſe.

verſe. Our duty and obligations to him commence with our birth; to his all-bounteous hand, we are indebted for the bleſſing of life, and all the happineſs we do or can enjoy. He hath not only made us capable of pleaſure, but, in the riches of his goodneſs, daily ſhowers down upon us the pleaſures themſelves. The grateful praiſes, therefore, of our infant tongues, belong to him, and the rational ſervices of our riper years are his due.

The object of our preſent conſideration is the other great branch of our duty, the offices due from us to our fellow-creatures. By the appointment of the Almighty, our Creator, we owe the preſervation of our being to the kindneſs and affection of others. We come into the world helpleſs—unknowing—and unable to relieve our wants, that we might be connected with each other by all the ties of gratitude and neceſſity. With our years our obligations unavoidably increaſe: and when arrived at the age of maturity, and the higheſt perfection

fection of our nature, we can no more live without the aſſiſtance of our fellow-creatures, than we could breathe without air. An interchange of good offices, not only enlarges the comforts of ſociety, but is abſolutely neceſſary to the preſervation of our being. There have been orders of animals, which are now no more; having by their natural ferocity preyed upon each other, till the whole race is deſtroyed: ſo, were not mankind to lend each other mutual aſſiſtance, but live upon the ſpoils of one another; human life would not only become miſerable, but the very race of mankind would ſoon be annihilated. The higheſt, and what are called the moſt independent, are notwithſtanding beholden to the ſervices of others for their eaſe and affluence—their independence itſelf depends upon the labour of others—and, in reality, they are more dependent than the ſlaves that miniſter to them.

By the will of the Moſt High therefore—by the law of our natures, the comforts

forts of life, and the very being of mankind depends upon their mutual ſupport and aſſiſtance. So that every religion, which is ſuited to the nature of man, or preſumed to have come down from heaven, muſt enjoin this duty, as its firſt principle, and the general rule of man's conduct to his fellow-creatures. Wherever any other precepts are laid down for the guidance of his actions, that religion is neither fit for God to command, nor man to receive.

With this principle in your eye, run over the various ſchemes of duty propoſed to mankind—examine the many religious ſyſtems that are now, or ever have been eſtabliſhed in the world. You cannot but obſerve, how ill adapted—how inconſiſtent they are with the nature of man—how intricate and confuſed in their precepts—how evidently defective in pointing out the proper ſource of our actions, the real principle of our duty. Divinely deſcended as was the Jewiſh religion, the Almighty never intended it to be univerſal. Too much reſembling

reſembling the other religious ſyſtems then eſtabliſhed, its laws were too narrow and confined, its injunctions too partial and ceremonious; and the maxim at that time univerſally prevalent, *Thou ſhalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy*, an inſurmountable bar to the propagation of it. How unlike—how oppoſite all this to the lovely ſimplicity of the goſpel! *But I ſay unto you, Love your enemies; bleſs them that curſe you; pray for them which deſpitefully uſe you, and perſecute you.*

This was a doctrine the world never before had had the leaſt idea of—this was enlarging the amiable affections of the ſoul, far beyond any thing they had hitherto imagined—was literally a new commandment: *A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another*; of the ſame import with the text, *Let brotherly love continue—love as brethren.*

A precept this, for its clearneſs, utility, and importance, equally remarkable—exempt from the obſcurity and confuſion of

the Heathen ſchemes of morality, and the rigid ſeverity and narrowneſs of the Jewiſh law—a precept, which the loweſt underſtanding may thoroughly comprehend—which the moſt refined abilities, in his own heart, may feel the force of—adapted to the condition of all ranks and orders of men, and by all equally practicable.

To look upon all mankind as our brethren—to love them as ourſelves, is the general principle of our holy religion, the univerſal rule for the guidance of our actions; the only one indeed, perfectly conſiſtent with the nature of man, and enlarged enough to extend to every part of his behaviour. From the ſentiments of the heart—from the affections of the ſoul, all our actions proceed—take their colour; and are bad or good, agreeable to the intention. In vain ſhall we declaim againſt the abandoned actions of others, while the heart remains depraved; in vain do we attempt to reform our own. So long as the fountain-head continues muddled and diſturbed, all the ſtreams deſcending from

it

it will flow diſcoloured and polluted. To go to the root of the evil—to amend our own, or the conduct of others, we muſt ſearch into the heart—correct the frowardneſs of our wills and depraved inclinations—*cleanſe ourſelves from all filthineſs of the fleſh and ſpirit*. Having brought about a change in the heart, and from eſteeming mankind as our enemies, begun to look upon them as our brethren—as ourſelves; the alteration in our ſentiments will immediately make its appearance in our actions, and will influence every part of our conduct. The eaſy overflowings of brotherly affection will ſhew themſelves in kindneſs and good offices to all mankind, and to ourſelves in chearfulneſs and ſelf-complacency.

But to view the excellence of this principle in the moſt advantageous light, mark the conduct of the man, whoſe actions are reſtrained by the fear of puniſhment only—whoſe innocence is only ſecured by the terrors of divine vengeance. What a ſettled gloom and ſullenneſs overhangs his countenance! What backwardneſs and diſ-

diſſatisfaction appear in all his behaviour! Out of humour with himſelf, as with all mankind, you ſoon diſcern his moroſe turn of mind from the ſeverity of his cenſures, and his half-ſtifled murmurs againſt the cruelty of providence. Attend him to his devotions in his cloſet and at church; in chearful thankſgivings for the mercies of heaven, how hardly does he join! With how ill a grace does he repeat the praiſes of the Lord, and how differently from that open ſatisfaction and pleaſure expreſſed in the countenances of the pious! And when the irkſome taſk of his duty is performed, with what alertneſs he retires, *as a bird eſcaped out of the ſnare of the fowler*—as if he had avoided ſome grievous calamity, ſome heavy impending judgment! His obedience, you ſee, is that of a ſlave, and the reſtraint of his duty is a yoke almoſt intolerable.

To every one who acts from ſuch a principle—who keeps within the limits of his duty, only from a dread of future puniſhment, religion is odious and burthenſome.

ſome. His ſervices themſelves are ſo many puniſhments, and the gloomy turn of his mind throws a ſhade even over his worſhip.

How different from ſuch a picture, appears the true diſciple of Jeſus! The friend of mankind—united with every one in brotherly affection and chriſtian charity; their actions are as oppoſite as the fountains whence they flow. The one a troubled ſtream, whoſe water is dark and diſcoloured; the other runs clear, chearful, and refreſhing all the grounds about it. *The yoke of Chriſt is eaſy and the burden light*, the true diſciple finds, becauſe he performs his duty from inclination. This gives an eaſe and livelineſs to all his manners, and the goodneſs of his heart beams out in the brightneſs of his countenance. He looks up to his creator with delight, and beholds his fellow-creatures with the eye of friendſhip and brotherly affection—he pays his adoration to the Supreme Being with a pleaſing ſatisfaction, eſteeming him as his father—his friend—from whoſe hand he knows he ſhall receive a hundred fold,

for

for every kindneſs ſhewn to his fellow creatures; and to them he performs the kind offices in his power in an eaſy, natural manner, agreeable to himſelf, and pleaſing to others.

Take but an intimate view of ſuch a man's character, and you will readily diſcover, in how eaſy a way all theſe advantages proceed from the influence of this principle—chriſtian benevolence—brotherly affection being ſo deeply rooted in the ſoul, he avoids the uſual occaſions of falling—the common vices of mankind, without any ſtruggle or difficulty. Run through the whole catalogue of human failings and offences againſt each other—trace them to their ſource; you will find they all flow from the want of this principle—that theſe fruits are infected by the corruption of the root.

Is it to kind affection—brotherly love, that the common, the faſhionable vice of ſlander owes its riſe? Is it out of tender regard to our neighbour, that we traduce his

his character, and butcher his reputation? Whatever men may think—how unimportant ſoever and trifling they may eſteem this vice of evil-ſpeaking; the heart wherein it dwells, I am ſure, retains not one ſpark of that warm, fond affection here recommended. From the gall of bitterneſs it ſprings, where reſides nothing but enmity, maliciouſneſs, and every unſocial affection.

Another you may obſerve, by every means in his power, endeavouring to defraud and oppreſs his poorer neighbours; and thoſe whom affluence ſecures from oppreſſion, he contrives to over-reach by artifice and treachery. Would a man, in this manner, injure and oppreſs his brother? Is it a friendly regard for them, which leads him to impoſe upon the unſuſpicious—to plunder the orphan and widow—and reduce to beggary all who come within his reach? That heart muſt be ſteeled againſt the tender feelings of humanity: Cruelty and injuſtice can never inhabit the ſame boſom with chriſtian love and charity.

Nor

Nor has the envious—he who repines at the happineſs of others, any better claim to this firſt, this univerſal principle of our holy religion. Would a man grieve at beholding his own honeſt endeavours crowned with ſucceſs; or grow miſerable at the proſperity of his brother or deareſt friends? As well might the huſbandman lament, that heaven has bleſſed the labour of his hands—that his fields abound with riches and plenty. This odious, but common paſſion of envy, is alſo accompanied with a degree of hatred—a turn of mind directly oppoſite to the amiable affection of the ſoul we here recommend.

In ſhort, in the breaſt, where this principle reſides, none of theſe offences can gain admittance. Chriſtian *love worketh no ill to his neighbour—thinketh no evil—is full of mercy and compaſſion*—injures no one, and when itſelf is injured, *is long-ſuffering, and not eaſily provoked—doth not avenge itſelf*, but remembers that, *Vengeance is mine; I will repay, ſaith the Lord.*

But

But as example hath always a very powerful influence upon the mind of man; as a proper concluſion of this diſcourſe, we ſhall point out to your imitation two, though by no means equally illuſtrious inſtances, wherein this virtue is exhibited to us in all its genuine charms and excellence. The Author of this new commandment, was himſelf the firſt, and moſt complete example of it the world hath ever beheld. By his kindneſs and affection for human nature, he was brought down from heaven—ſubmitted to all the frailties and hardſhips of a humble condition—and at laſt by cruel hands to be crucified and ſlain. The Lord of Life, out of love to his enemies, freely endured whatever their malice and cruelty could inflict. *He went about doing good*—it was the buſineſs of his life—his ſole employment. What kindneſs, gentleneſs, and brotherly affection appeared through all his character, I need not tell you; but may leave his life to ſpeak for itſelf.

Another illuſtrious inſtance of the excellence of this duty, is the Lady we are here

aſſembled to lament. In her example—in all her actions, the influence of this benevolent affection was remarkably conſpicuous. Mild ſhe was and gentle in all her manners—eaſy and condeſcending to all who knew her. This chriſtian principle—this brotherly affection deeply implanted in her breaſt, and diffuſing its influence over her whole conduct; at once you ſaw into the kind intentions of her ſoul, and the integrity of her heart. This gave an eaſy, unaffected, graceful turn to all her manners. Nature unadulterated is always pleaſing. Upon every occaſion free from pride—never demeaning herſelf with an unnatural, ſupercilious haughtineſs, ſhe forced eſteem from all ranks and orders of men. Equally agreeable to rich and poor—the one have loſt a kind, a pleaſing companion: the other, alas! a friend—a protector, who felt for their diſtreſſes, and relieved them.

We, my Brethren, have our ſhare in the calamity—we, whilſt ſhe was permitted to remain with us, could not but admire; and in admiring, could not refuſe to imitate; and

and our imitation could not but lead us to whatever was amiable, whatever was excellent, whatever was chriſtian.

But in what terms ſhall we deſcribe the diſtreſſes of her family! By what words can we expreſs their ſorrows! To thoſe ſhe was neareſt, ſhe was moſt dear. They only know her real excellence—they only have been bleſt with all her tenderneſs and affection—they only know the value of their loſs!

In all our afflictions, however, we have this conſolation, that our loſs is her gain—that the ſource of our ſorrows is the fountain of her felicity. Though human weakneſs lament, ſhe is glad—though we be ſorrowful, ſhe rejoices—rejoices at the right hand of her God and Saviour, with whom ſhe reigns in glory for ever and ever.

Let not any one think, that we have launched out into extravagant encomiums, or ſtepped beyond the boundaries of truth. This ſacred place forbids it—the ſubject has no need of it. We have ſcarce indeed done

done juſtice to her excellence—we have took no notice of her chriſtian humility—her conſtant attendance upon the public worſhip and ordinances of God—her warm, unaffected devotion—and the many other chriſtian virtues ſhe poſſeſſed; but have kept to the important, the excellent ſubject of our text; firmly perſuaded, from her own ſelection of this particular ſcripture, that ſhe intended this diſcourſe, rather for the uſe of the living, than an eulogy upon the dead. This precept, her own appointment long before her deceaſe, is highly characteriſtic of her goodneſs of heart, and beſpeaks the eſteem of the world with irreſiſtible grace and energy. Of what it recommends, ſhe ſaw the neceſſity—ſhe felt the force—and lived and died a moſt amiable example, in the eighty-ſecond year of her age.

Now to God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghoſt, three perſons, &c.

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